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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the social variation of language, this paper provides an overview of basic sociolinguistic concepts deemed to be necessary information for teachers involved in the language and literacy development of children who speak nonstandard dialects. The first section of the paper discusses three things that teachers must understand about dialects: (1) all varieties of language are rule-governed systems--even nonstandard dialects have rules and patterns that are systematic; (2) all dialects have the capacity for the functional expression of meaning; and (3) language variation extends beyond the characteristics of dialects. Some general principles and implications for instruction are outlined in the remainder of the paper within the categories of language assessment, standard English in the language arts, and reading performance. The principles and implications that are listed include the notions that cultural and linguistic differences will influence performance on tests, that children should be provided with opportunities to learn a standard form of language, and that the focus of reading instruction for all children (including children with different dialects) should emphasize meaningful comprehension. (RL)

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STANDARD AND NONSTANDARD DIALECTS:

PRINCIPLES FOR LANGUAGE AND READING INSTRUCTION *

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As urban and rural schools serve children from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, good teachers and curriculum designers consider these variables in adapting reading-language arts instruction to meet the diverse needs of students. An important consideration is the students' linguistic and cultural heritage, which must be respected by all teachers. For, children posess a rich knowledge of the functions and structures of their native dialects. Teachers must especially realize that the "language of poor children" is not necessarily "poor language." Nonstandard dialects, which are common in low income populations, have been shown to be legitimate systems of communication. Nonetheless, schools are expected to facilitate the learning of literacy skills in standard English.

The following discussion has three objectives. After reading this article, teachers will (1) better understand some basic sociolinguistic concepts and principles regarding nonstandard dialects; (2) better understand the implications of language differences for language assessment and functional language arts/ reading instruction; (3) have references to current research and instructional practices for language and literacy development. Teachers must be linguistically informed in order to teach children from various cultural groups. Before outlining the complex educational principles, a brief survey of sociolinguistics and dialectology is crucial.

Sociolinguistics is the study of sociological aspects of language. The field is very broad. Sociolinguists are interested in the social impact of language policies of governments (e.g. spelling reform, choices of a national language), the language behaviors and styles of various ethnic groups, and the regional and social variations of language. In general, sociolinguists are interested in how language is used and how language functions in various social contexts.

Dialectology is the study of regional and social variations that exist in a language. A dialect is a variety of a language identifiable to the speakers of a given community. Dialects include the common set of phonological, syntactic and vocabulary choices used in a community. Dialects may vary across geographical boundaries. These are called regional dialects. Thus, in the New Orleans area, you will have red gravy instead of tomato sauce on your meat ball po-boy, which may be either dressed or undressed. Some residents live in shotgun doubles in Orleans Parish or St. Charles Parish. As they visit the supermarket, they will be making groceries. These are just a few of the local expressions in New Orleans. (See Shuy (1967) for an interesting survey of regional dialects.)

The main focus in this article is on social variation of language. A social dialect is defined as a variety of language used in a particular social class. As part of his research on the social stratification of English in New York City, Labov (1972b) documented that linguistic forms correlate with social class boundaries. For example, the phonological feature of the deletion of r (fo'th flo' for fourth floor) occurred more frequently in lower classes than in middle or upper classes. Labov (1975) further documented that language features not only vary across social classes, but also vary from casual speech, careful speech, reading style for prose, and reading style for word lists. It is normal for speakers of a language to vary their speech from situation to situation and from audience to audience. This occurs regardless of social class. (Labov 1975).

Within the study of social dialectology are the concepts of standard and nonstandard English. While the former refers generally to the idealized varieties of language spoken and preferred by the more educated members of a community; the latter consists of the varieties used by speakers in lower classes with far less formal education. While the two terms suggest a distinction between dialects, the reality of language variation is that there is a continuum of standardness

as well as formality. A set of examples presented by Shuy(1977, p.85) can be used to illustrate this range:

1. Hey! Don't bring no more a dem crates over here!
2. Hey! Don't bring no more a dose crates over here!
3. Hey! Don't bring no more a those crates over here!
4. Hey! Don't bring any more of those crates over here!
5. Please don't bring any more of those crates over here.
6. Gentlemen, will you kindly desist in your conveying those containers in this general direction?

In spite of the sociolinguistic reality of such continua, many phonological and syntactic features have been characterized as either standard or nonstandard. A convenient list is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 About Here.

However, various social classes and cultural groups will vary in the frequency of occurrence or combination of these features. Furthermore, some of the features labled as nonstandard (e.g. the deletion the the r) may be considered standard in some regions of the country, e.g. Boston. Likewise, some of these features may be used by standard speakers in informal situations. Thus, there is not just one standard English and one nonstandard English dialect.

Much of the sociolinguistic literature in education focuses on "Black English Vernacular," a variety of language identifiable to lower income black populations. The surface features of BEV dialects include many of the characteristics presented earlier. Yet, it is important to remember that:(1) There are many varieties of BEV. (2) Not all black speakers use nonstandard English. (3) Many of the features of nonstandard English are shared across racial boundaries, although the frequencies of occurrence of specific features will vary among whites and blacks in various social classes. (See Shuy 1977, pp. 86–88). (For more information on Black English dialects, see Labov 1972a , Dillard 1972, Burling 1973, and Hall & Freedle 1975.)

Dialect features are not the only way that language varies across cultural groups. Studies in the ethnography of communication have provided evidence of cultural differences in functional communication styles. For urban Black America, Kochman (1972) and Burling (1973) presented some of these styles: Rapping is a lively narrative of events. Shucking or jiving is the speech event when speakers use language to produce a favorable appearance to an authority figure suspecting them of wrongdoing. Signifying or Playing the Dozens is the ritual of verbal insults. Styling Out is the discourse of many black ministers. (See Taylor & Ortony 1981.) While ethnic groups may vary in communication rituals, adult - child interaction may differ across cultural groups. In a classic study conducted in Rosepoint, Louisiana by Ward (1971), two of the many culturally specific social rules found were that children are encouraged to be quiet in the company of adults and that parents would not actively expand on children's utterences, although expanding on their own statements. Thus, children in such communities quite naturally learn the social behavior of being quiet and less linguistically assertive in the company of adults. This is just a brief illustration of cultural variation in language, which extends beyond the surface structural features of dialects.

To summarize, teachers must understand at least three linguistic principles about dialects:

(1) All varieties of language are rule governed systems. Thus, nonstandard dialects do have rules and patterns that are systematic for members of a particular speech community.

(2) All dialects have the capacity for the functional expression of meaning.

(3) Language variation extends beyond the characteristics of dialects.

Following is an outline of some general principles and implications for instruction.

Although the themes are complex and the literature extensive, the principles which follow are presented succinctly within three catagories: language assessment, standard English in the language arts, and reading performance.

Language Assessment

There is more to an adaquate assessment of language performance than standardized tests. Teachers must understand that children's language, culture, and situational contexts are crucial variables in test performance.

1. Cultural and linguistic differences will influence performance on tests. Teachers need to be sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences in interpreting test results. For example, a study by Williams and Rivers (1972)* demonstrated that children do better on tests if the vocabulary on the test matches their cultural background. Likewise, a study by Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey and Anderson (1981) demonstrated that prose material reflecting the black culture communication style of verbal insults was interpreted differently by black and white eighth graders. Black subjects generally comprehended the passage to be about verbal play, while white subjects generally comprehended the passage to be about physical aggression. This illustrates how cultural schemata can affect interpretation of prose material.

2. Variations in the situation are crucial to language performance, and therefore need to be considered in language assessment. At least three research studies support this principle. Hall, Cole, Reder & Dowley (1977) found that lower class black preschool children were less verbal and less spontaneous in the classroom situation, but more verbal in the supermarket. Steffensen & Guthrie (1980) studied the oral language production of black preschool children using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test by varying the situation. They found that if the child performed the task with the adult investigator present, the language included more highly elliptical responses, tense shifts and pronouns without antecedents. While in the situation where the child was alone describing

*Reported in Hall and Freedle (1975).

the picture for the investigator, the language was more elaborate and well formed. Furthermore, Straker (1980) found that the situational context was a crucial factor in bidialectical speaker's switching from black English to standard English features. For example, Black English would more likely occur in the context of intimate settings, while a more standard variety would be used in the context of differentiation of status and values of the participants.

3. Teachers must further realize that differences in grammar do not imply lack of grammar development. The verbal deficit hypothesis, which states that dialect speaking children have underdeveloped or illogical language, has been disproved on linguistic grounds by Labov and other sociolinguists, and on developmental psycholinguistic grounds by Steffensen (1974, 1978). Sociolinguists have documented the complexities of nonstandard dialects. Steffensen found natural patterns of language development for young children's acquisition of black English vernacular. Thus, teachers must understand that children's language is very complex and systematic.

Standard English in the Language Arts

Although nonstandard dialects are viable systems of communication, much controversy exists regarding any acceptance by teachers (See Burling 1973). Although it is not true that nonstandard dialects are inferior or ineffective language systems for certain contexts within one's culture, standard English dialects carry many social, political and economic advantages. For example, many employers may not hire a job applicant whose language is not a socially preferred dialect for the job or profession.

1. Therefore, children should be provided with opportunities to learn a standard variety. However, children normally do not acquire a new dialect unless they are motivated to do so and unless they see its function. (See Shuy 1981).

2. In developing curricula for facilitating the acquisition of a standard English dialect, at least three philosophical principles must permeate the program (Marcus 1977). Students must:become aware of the systematic differences between the home dialect and the school dialect, become motivated to use language and to learn the new variety, and be provided with many opportunities to practice language in real life situations.

3. However, the priorities of language arts instruction should include many opportunities for developing real functions of language use: to inform, to persuade, to make requests, to promise, to entertain, to deny, to seek clarification, to extend sympathy, and to open and close a discourse. These are more basic to language communication than the surface features of grammar and pronunciation (See Shuy 1981). While learning appropriate pronunciation and grammar has its place in the classroom, isolated drills should not dominate the language arts curriculum, especially to the exclusion of functional approaches as role playing, giving demonstration speeches, writing advertisements, letters and stories.

Reading Performance

The area of dialect differences and reading performance has received much attention during the past fifteen to twenty years. The question of how to teach reading of standard English to speakers of nonstandard dialects can be discussed in terms of dialect interference and/ or influence on reading performance as well as methods for respecting the language and culture of minority children in teaching reading. The issues and solutions are complex and deep. A summary of implications are listed below.

1. Dialect differences might interfere with reading comprehension. There is much controversy in the sociolinguistics and reading literature about the extent to which dialect differences cause reading problems. This is a classic

question which stimulated much research in the late sixties and early seventies. (See reviews by Harber and Bryen (1976) and Hall & Guthrie (1980). Much of the early research is contradictory because of methodological problems in conducting research (e.g. failure to control for socioeconomic and linguistic backgrounds of the subjects; or focusing on the phonological or grammatical features without regard to situational or semantic variables.) However, a recent study demonstrated the effect of the deletion of verb endings upon reading comprehension of CLOZE passages by children whose native dialect is Black English Vernacular (Steffensen, Reynolds, McClure and Guthrie 1981). Children in grades three, six and nine, whose native oral language had the feature of verb ending deletion, generally made more errors on the comprehension measures. (See also Labov 1972a). However, fluent reading goes beyond the structural details. Hall & Guthrie (1980) suggested that research should go beyond surface phonological and grammatical features by focusing more on the effects of lexical and situational differences on reading performance, (See also Hall & Guthrie 1979).

2. To say that dialects may not necessarily interfere with reading does not imply that dialect differences do not influence reading (Wolfram et al. 1979). Teachers must be aware of the influence of dialect on oral reading and auditory discrimination in decoding. Oral reading miscues based on dialect differences are not evidence of poor reading. Oral reading in one's dialect is natural (Goodman & Buck 1973). For example, a native of Boston may read park as "pahk", while a native of the South may say "pawk". Other phonological examples include den for then, tin for thin, ball for boil. These do not interfere with reading, unless no context is given. Likewise, it is possible to find some readers read the sentence, "The man is smart.", as "The man smart.," illustrating a syntactic shift influenced by dialect. Teachers should decide which oral reading miscues are influenced by dialect and which one's are the result of underdeveloped reading/decoding strategies.

Performance on auditory discrimination tasks may also be influenced by dialect variation, expecially when the contrasts required by the test or exercize are not made in the native dialect of the child or adult (Geissal & Knafle 1977), such as cot/caught, then/den, flow/floor, Mary/merry/marry. Some dialects make contrasts between certain words, while other dialects may not. Thus, if the contrast is not made in the child's dialect, there is a strong possibility that an item will be missed on a test or exercize. Missing an item on an auditory discrimination test does not, therefore, imply a learning/perceptual deficit. Instead, it may indicate the rule or pattern of the child's dialect. Thus, teachers need to become aware of which pairs of words are subject to this contrast variability (Burling 1973). Furthermore, in teaching reading, many of these pairs can be taught in context, where meaningful comprehension is the priority.

3. The focus of reading instruction for <u>all</u> children (not just dialectically different children) should emphasize meaningful comprehension. Some of the techniques that emphasize meaning are the Language Experience Approach (Hall 1970, Stauffer 1980), Directed Reading Thinking Activities(Stauffer 1980) and Experience-Text-Relationship Method (Au 1979). With these approaches, the focus can be placed on bridging the gap between the language and culture of the child and the language and culture of the text.

4. Most importantly, the language and culture of minority children must be respected as one of the prerequisites to guiding children in the acquisition of reading proficiency of standard English. Goodman and Buck stated this principle another way: "The only special disadvantage which speakers of low-status dialects suffer in learning to read is one imposed by teachers and schools. Rejection of their dialects and educators' confusion of linguistic difference with linguistic deficiency interferes with the natural process by

which reading is acquired and undermines the linguistic selfconfidence of divergent speakers . . . Instruction based on rejection of linguistic difference is the core of the problem (p. 6.)"

Concluding Remarks

The preceding discussion served as an overview of basic sociolinguistic concepts as necessary information for teachers involved in language and literacy development of children speaking nonstandard dialects. An outline of trends and principles were also provided as guidelines for teaching children from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Over the past two decades, much has been learned about dialect variation in the classroom. A statement by Shuy (1979) will serve as a useful summary: "One of the happy developments in recent years has been the slowly growing understanding that variety in language is a healthy thing, even an asset. Schools still expect appropriate writing and speaking for school contexts, but they now also realize that other registers of language are appropriate for non school contexts! There has even been some progress toward understanding the different regional and social dialects that students quite naturally can be expected to bring with them to school . . ." Dialect variation will always exist as long as there are speakers of language. Let us go beyond these differences to achieve more functional language and literacy instruction.

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Table 1

Some Common Features of Nonstandard Dialects

Phonological	
Simplification of Consonant Clusters	desk - des' past - pass told - toll
Deletion of l	help - he'p bowl - bow
Voiced th	that - dat this - dis breathe-breave bathe - bave
Voiceless th	thin - tin thing - ting mouth - mouf with - wif
Deletion of r	park - pawk pork - poke
Morphological/Syntactic	
Deletion of plural markers	thirty cents - thirty cent
Deletion of 3rd person	She like the book.
Deletion of Past Tense	The girl call yesterday.
Invariant BE	The man be late.
BE deletion	The man late.
Multiple Negation	I don't got no money today.
Existential It	It was five dogs in the kennel.
Double Subjects	My sister, she bought a Chevy.

Adapted from Burling (1973), Labov (1975), and Marcus (1977).